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A Soviet Spy's Defender

DAILY BOOK REVIEW

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STRANGERS ON A BRIDGE:
The Case of Colonel Abel.
By James B. Donovan.
432 pages. Atheneum.
\$6.95.

By Maurice Dolbier

"I HOPE you know what lies ahead," a State Supreme Court Justice told James Britt Donovan. "Since John Adams defended the British soldiers for the Boston Massacre... no defense lawyer has taken on a less popular client."

The client was Col. Rudolf Ivanovich Abel, considered by government authorities to be the most important Soviet agent ever captured in the United States. The case would be "the first peacetime prosecution of an alien spy in this country under the so-called Rosenberg Law, making espionage a capital crime in peacetime." Donovan had been selected for the task by the Brooklyn Bar Association and assigned to it by U. S. District Court Judge Matthew Abruzzo, who said that Donovan's background as a Roman Catholic, a former OSS intelligence officer, and an American Legion post commander, was an added qualification.

There were, as anticipated, unpleasantnesses: anonymous letters, obscene telephone calls in the middle of the night, hurtful remarks by Donovan's children's schoolmates, snide remarks by other lawyers who should have known better. But they were outnumbered by the messages that recognized the difficulties and the duties of the assignment, and that this would be (as it was) a demonstration of American justice at its best.

From the beginning, Donovan kept a day-by-day record of defense tactics, of the testimony and speeches delivered in the courtroom, of his private interviews with his client. The defense was conducted with conscientious thoroughness and sharpness (an FBI agent later told Donovan: "We used to sit there in the back. . . . We began by hating you, wondering what it would be like to be on the stand against you. But after a while we liked the way you fought for your man. Some of us even got to like you a little").

Abel was found guilty, but instead of the death penalty was given a prison term in

This turned out to be prophetic, for while downed U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers was not "of equivalent rank" with Col. Abel, an exchange was considered to be in this country's best interest, and Mr. Donovan went behind the Iron Curtain to conduct the negotiations, which led not only to Soviet Russia's release of Powers but also to East Germany's release of an American student named Pryor.

His experiences on that mission make up the closing section of "Strangers on a Bridge," and give the book an added power as a first-hand account of the contrasts between an open and a closed society. In the American sequences, people (with the exception of Col. Abel) are who they say they are; in East Germany, Mr. Donovan held meetings with women who claimed to be Abel's wife and daughter but weren't, and conducted his principal negotiations with one Schischkin, who was represented as Second Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in East Germany but was, in the opinion of American officials, the chief of the KGB in Western Europe.



James B. Donovan

Atlanta. In a letter to the presiding judge, urging that the death penalty should not be considered, Donovan had given as one of his reasons: "It is possible that in the foreseeable future an American of equivalent rank will be captured by Soviet Russia or an ally; at such time an exchange of prisoners through diplomatic channels could be considered to be in the best interest of the United States."